

# Introduction

The James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA) was signed on November 11, 1975 by the Cree and Inuit peoples of Quebec, the governments of Canada and Quebec, the James Bay Development Corporation, the James Bay Energy Corporation and Hydro Quebec. Three years later, on January 31, 1978, the Naskapi of Schefferville signed a similar agreement, the Northeastern Quebec Agreement (NEQA).

The JBNQA and NEQA are the first comprehensive land claim agreements signed in modern times by Canada and Aboriginal people. The agreements include self-government components and lay the foundations for a new relationship between the Cree, the Inuit and the Naskapi and the Government of Canada.

The territory covered by the JBNQA and NEQA is comprised of more than 1,000,000 square kilometres of land in Quebec between the 48<sup>th</sup> and 62<sup>nd</sup> parallels. It was once part of a larger federal territory known as Rupert's Land.

A century ago, the Parliament of Canada transferred two vast stretches of Rupert's Land to Quebec, with Quebec's consent. The first transfer took place in 1898 and Quebec's borders were extended northward to the 52<sup>nd</sup> parallel. The second transfer occurred in 1912 and Quebec's borders were extended northward again as far as Hudson Strait and the 62<sup>nd</sup> parallel and eastward as far as Labrador. The 1912 Quebec Boundaries Extension Act carried certain obligations for the Quebec government, including the obligation to reach an agreement on land-related issues with the Aboriginal inhabitants. However, discussions regarding these matters would not begin until more than 60 years later.

The inhabitants of these northern lands, which are barren but incredibly diverse in terms of climate and resources, are Indian and Inuit peoples with significantly different cultures, methods of social organization and languages. The Cree, the Inuit and the Naskapi follow a traditional way of life in which they harvest a large number of wildlife and marine resources. Many continue to earn their living by hunting, fishing and trapping. When the Quebec government launched its hydroelectric power development activities in Northern Quebec, the land claims and other claims of the Aboriginal people living on these lands had not yet been settled. In 1972, the Quebec Cree and Inuit went to court in order to halt the hydroelectric work.

In November 1973, Judge Albert Malouf of the Quebec Superior Court ordered that all work be stopped immediately, in particular because Quebec had not yet fulfilled its obligation under the 1912 Act. In 1974, the Quebec Court of Appeal reversed Judge Malouf's decision, but in late 1973, the parties had already begun negotiations to reach a final agreement. These negotiations culminated in the signing of the JBNQA in 1975.

Subsequently, in 1978, the Naskapi Band of Schefferville signed the Northeastern Quebec Agreement with the Government of Quebec and certain crown corporations, the Government of Canada, the Grand Council of the Crees (of Quebec) and the Northern Quebec Inuit Association, establishing similar rights to those acquired by the Cree under the JBNQA.